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The Diversity and Insularity of Sociological Traditions

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[p. 79 ↓]

Chapter 5: The Diversity and Insularity of Sociological Traditions

The Importance of Traditions

Sociologists should make the choices at each of the stages of a research or writing project – conceptual approach, methodology, presentational style, etc. – in terms of what is most appropriate for that particular topic. However, almost inevitably, sociologists are strongly, albeit often unconsciously, intellectually influenced at each point in their projects by received or developing traditions, paradigms, lines of thought, and socially influenced by the ‘social embedding’ of such cognitive structures in ‘schools’, ‘theory-groups’, ‘research networks’ and other forms of intellectual social organization. Such influences and pre-structurings of approaches are, more often than not, complex rather than simple, with different sociological traditions influencing different aspects of the project, and with multiplex strands very often simultaneously in play.

There is room for authorial choice, as well as the play of more determinate shapings imposed by established authorities. Traditions are not necessarily limiting. Very many sociologists would agree that the influence of sociological traditions is in fact *necessary*. After all, as Weber argued, the very choice of research topic cannot be decided on strictly scientific grounds. Where there is more room for disagreement is on whether the press of sociological traditions determines the outcomes of investigations, or whether they merely provide alternative and equivalent paths to much the same final outcome. Will the truth ‘out’ irrespective of the play of traditions dancing around a bedrock of firm reality, or is ‘social reality’ varyingly constructed by each tradition?¹ Moreover, there is room for choice along a multiplicity of dimensions, as opposed to the highly simplifying notions often imposed by textbook taxonomists eager to tidy up the messiness in order to inculcate order in the minds of neophyte sociologists.

Indeed, many sociologists would argue for the importance of traditions as providing the continuing backbone of sociological thinking, and are prepared to invest energies in their maintenance and communication. This is so particularly in the teaching activities of sociologists.

What sociologists' understandings of traditions are is an open empirical question. There is likely a considerable range of views about the nature and scope of traditions. A similar empirical question is the extent to which sociologists are conscious and informed in their choices amongst traditions, and the extent to which they are able to follow through the consequences of the assumptions embedded in any particular tradition in ways that are logical and coherent. Some sociologists clearly cleave to a particular approach, but at the other [p. 80 ↓] extreme, some deny being influenced by any specific tradition.

Defining Traditions

Intellectual traditions can take many forms. It is also difficult to pin down any particular vocabulary in discussing them. The term 'tradition' emphasizes rather too much the connotation of respect for past thinking. But other terms have drawbacks too. 'School' implies rather too much a formal organization, leadership and even intellectual control from that leadership. The ambiguities around Kuhns (1962) fecund term 'paradigm' have led to a major commentary industry. I would prefer, then, to use the term 'sociological tradition' in a loose sense to refer to any cognitive formation that lends consistency to aspects of thinking amongst sociologists, whether or not the doctrine concerned is unique within sociology or also shared by wider groupings of intellectuals or scientists.

It is important to delimit, within traditions, some of their possible components and dimensions. There is a tendency amongst historians of social theory to restrict their concerns to traditions which are theoretical. But, any sociological work (and thus any fully formed tradition) must inevitably cover, at least, each of meta-methodological, conceptual, methodological and ideological aspects. In terms of their internal state, traditions may vary in terms of their degree of historical development, the tightness of their formal development, the linkages between the theory espoused and the facts

considered important in the tradition, the closure of their boundaries, the degree of reflexive consciousness with which they are held by adherents, the moral tone which is pursued etc. In addition, there are more social aspects to traditions which may also affect their trajectory: the degree of social cohesion, organizational contours, shared cultural assumptions of adherents etc., and their fit with the envioning culture and society.²

Writings on sociological traditions vary in terms of which aspect is emphasized, and over time further salient dimensions have been added for consideration. Important writings in the (historical) sociology of sociology have drawn attention to each of these major dimensions, for example:

Having scouted out some of the complexities of what is involved with traditions, let us return to their central core. Donald Levine (1995) has provided a useful imagery of what is at the heart of any sustained and cumulative sociological discourse. He sees each tradition as a conversation, a dialogue between sociologists. As with other intellectual activities which are largely text-based, time and space are limited in their effect as barriers. Thus, such conversations can take place between generations of sociologists (as well as within generations) and across countries (as well as within them). Levine defines traditions as inter- and intra-generational conversations amongst intellectuals which tend to share particular assumptions about social reality. (A critique of conceptions of Sociological Traditions is provided in Baehr and O'Brien, 1994; Baehr, 2002.)

Any tradition cannot merely be regarded on its own. Rather, it must be placed within the context of the other traditions then pertaining, and on the relations amongst these traditions. Usually, contemporaneous traditions are in competition, and sometimes in conflict, although they may also ignore each other with studied contempt. I shall refer to any prevailing climate of inter-tradition relations as involving 'tradition-sets'.

[p. 81 ↓]

In this [chapter I](#) will: discuss the methodologies of identifying traditions; review conceptualizations of the dynamics of traditions; provide a comparative/historical account of factors shaping traditions; profile views of pre-disciplinary traditions of

social theory; typologize contemporary traditions; examine other types of tradition, e.g. methodological; note various mechanisms for linking traditions; and summarize some of the empirical studies of sociological traditions, before concluding.

Methodology for Identifying Traditions: The History of Sociological Classifications

In studying traditions there is a prior methodological question: what is the correct way of proceeding in identifying traditions? As Levine (1995: 13) has remarked, sociology was officially born carrying with it a schema of its own history. Comte coined the term and simultaneously laid out his version of its trajectory. Such histories tend to include a classification of types of sociology, and the various substantive traditions comprising this history. Concern with the classification of types of sociology almost inevitably accompanies any enterprise in theory. The classifying of types of tradition, then, is often a highly contested topic, with rival schema often being pressed into service for purposes other than writing the cool, calm, historical record. It is a process of social production (cf. Connell, 1997; cf. Schumpeter's famous definition of two types of 'schools').

Classifications of theory are not only part and parcel of normal sociological argumentation. A secondary usage then develops by those textbook writers whose contribution it is to provide classifications of theories. Such classifications are sometimes largely historical in orientation and sometimes more contemporary in purpose. Such classifications then tend to become built into classroom teaching, especially in theory and history of sociology courses, and begin to take on a life of their own. However, they risk breaking connections with the linkages between theory developments and ongoing sociological debates. Without such organic connections, classifications may ossify.

Much thinking about traditions is concerned with the rather different task of trying to specify the parameters of theoretical possibilities. For example, much recent theorizing consists in cogitations upon dichotomies (or polarities or 'dualities'), between such contrasts as the subjective and the objective, structure and action, macro and micro. These then become cognitive anchors for developing classifications of

traditions: for example, those traditions stressing the subjective vs. the objective, those emphasizing the micro-level rather than the macro level, etc. But too often the temptation to reify these positions is not resisted. Emphases become essential defining features. Theoretical concern with the alternative possibilities in theorizing is useful in constructing typologies of different traditions, but it has dangers in averting attention from what features are actually expressed in different traditions.

In short, I am wary of commentaries. Traditions must be shown to affect actual sociological writing. For example, in his study of types of sociology, Menzies usefully distinguishes between 'theorist's theory', and 'researcher's theory'. Studies such as that of Mullins (1973) have endeavoured to systematically trace how traditions are passed on through master-apprenticeship pairings, and are sustained by networks of like minds. Accordingly, this account will pay particularly careful attention to such empirical studies of traditions.³

The Dynamics of Traditions: A Sociology of Sociological Change

Traditions can have an intellectual and a social life of their own, and the qualities of their infrastructure may have an effect on the cognitive characteristics of the tradition. In considering sociological traditions we need to be alert to the social conditions underpinning them and the social processes through which they are formed and change.

[p. 82 ↓]

A considerable conceptual vocabulary has developed which allows the description of the dynamics of traditions. On to Kuhn's terms such as 'periods of normal science' and 'revolutionary periods' were grafted other terms such as 'progressive and regressive shifts'. More recently, Alexander and Colomy (1992) have added a further slew of terms.⁴

Rather more interestingly, sociologists have also developed 'phase models' of the development of specialities – which might also apply to sociological traditions (cf. Crane, 1972; Mullins, 1973; Rule, 1997). Traditions and specialities are often built on a slowly developed platform, and then break away into a fast-developing growth phase, before hitting a plateau and in some cases then declining. Institutionalization, and obtaining a secure supply of requisite resources and recruits, is necessary for a tradition to be sustained (cf. Turner and Turner, 1990). Traditions often forge strong social ties amongst members, with master-apprenticeship relations being essential for their longer-term growth (cf. Collins, 1994; Mullins, 1973).

Over time, Alexander has argued particular strategic cognitive patterns are likely to emerge, with disciples for example, tending to de-stress the particularities which the tradition's masters tended to emphasize. Mulkay develops a more radical argument whereby 'Theoretical development is regarded as being neither continuous nor, in any direct way, cumulative. Instead, it is seen as arising from a number of discrete and intermittent theoretical reorganizations, which centre upon new strategies devised as replacements for the unsuccessful policies adopted by prior theory' (1971:3).

The Shaping of Traditions: A Comparative/ Historical Account of Factors Shaping Traditions

The rise and fall of (national and other) traditions are shaped by various cultural, ideological, political, institutional, cognitive and social factors both generally, but also in different ways in different national contexts. Such external influences may override some of the internal dynamics of traditions.

The broadest influence is undoubtedly that of culture. Cultures stressing the importance, in both the natural and social realms, of the acquisition of rational explicit scientific principles and of empirical fact-finding, and even more importantly the importance of developing systematic ways of interfacing the rational and the empirical, are much more likely to foster successful social science. An important influence on the development of

social science are the models of natural scientific inquiry admired by social scientists. Each of the main traditions has philosophers, and also scientists of more general importance, whose understandings of science were highly consequential for work in that tradition. For example, Newton's views on science had a particular resonance within subsequent British thinking.

Aspects of religious thinking in a country also affect the development of science and social science. Prior to the reformation and enlightenment, secular social thinking was often discouraged. Moreover, 'In Protestant countries close relations developed between intellectuals and churches. Intellectuals were harnessed in the conflict with Catholic ideas and politics; there was more room for debate since (some) Protestant religions were not anchored by a central dogma; and since Protestant clergymen could raise families, intellectual dynasties could be more readily formed. Thus, in England, and also the Netherlands and Scandinavia, scientific innovation was linked with religious debate. However, in France secularization of intellectual culture took place with support from the state and the court, and did not involve the development of scientific thought, since literary genres were dominant. Therefore scientization without secularization in contrast to secularization without scientization' (Heilbron, 1995: 63–4).

Different cultures house much the same range of ideological perspectives, but some national consistencies can be found. French ideology more often stresses radical change, drawing on its rationalist heritage, whereas in [p. 83 ↓] the UK and the United States emphasis is more on reform, flowing from a strain towards empiricism. In Germany ideology is often idealist, humanist and anti-positivist.

Each culture has somewhat different ways of portraying what is covered within the realm of the social sciences. In Germany *sozialwis-senschaften* is a broad conceptualization, whereas in the Anglo-US world a sharper distinction is usually drawn between the social sciences and the humanities. France is more complex, with economics located within Faculties of Law whereas the other human sciences are located within the broader humanistic framework of Faculties of Letters. Which particular disciplines are separately identified has also differed: with some continental university systems often presenting more policy-orientated types of knowledge: for example, demography, criminology, sociography in the Netherlands. More recently, the distribution of disciplines which developed in American universities has successfully

diffused world-wide, and has become the norm against which the array of disciplines in other countries has come to be measured. The main disciplines of social science, including sociology, tend now to have an American imprimatur. However, even if the general approach of the discipline has been set by its grounding in American institutional structures, the content of sociology has more recently been more often influenced by Continental sources.

Each culture understands the relationships between its component 'social fields' rather differently. Although most modern societies have in common separate economic, political and social realms, together with many minor arenas of social life, how each is constituted and what its relationships are to other spheres may differ considerably, and this has consequences for social science work in that society. The various disciplines tend to have a particular interactive relationship with one or other of the social realms in that society: with the social science discourse being in part constitutive of that realm, and in part being shaped by it. These schema constitute 'deep structures' that may implicitly guide the development of particular national traditions over many generations. For example, in France the state has long been a very central and powerful institution, although there has been a strong discouragement of scholarship in political science. In France, society ('the social') became distinct from church and politics, and then the economy, but in Germany the distinction was resisted. The possibilities of the development of sociology were shaped by these differences.

During the period of German university development from the late 1700s through to the mid-1800s, literary and artistic intellectuals were not accommodated in universities. One result of this appears to have been that 'the independent non-university intellectuals became hostile to the new professorial form of knowledge production' (Heilbron, 1995: 24). This involved a Romanticist rejection of cold hard facts, which developed alongside, and in reaction to, the professionalization of knowledge, and provided an alternative and oppositional stock of intellectual resources, which has most recently been drawn on in the development of postmodernism.

The policy process is different in different states. In the UK, fact-finding was institutionalized in the role of Royal Commissions, inspectorates and social reform research associations, but these were weakly linked (at least as far as formal ties are concerned) with the policy-making. Social network ties amongst various members

of the elite could provide channels for information to percolate to policymakers. However, links between social researchers and policymakers have remained ever since generally at arm's-length. In Germany, there was also considerable state involvement in statistics collection. On the other hand, in the Netherlands a tradition of longer-term policy-making developed and this was able to articulate with a slew of empirically orientated research approaches such as sociography and social geography, which were particularly well developed there. The interest of states in social research and their capacity to promote it and then to utilize findings vary considerably.

Although the attention of historians of sociology is particularly drawn to examining theoretical traditions, there are also research [p. 84 ↓] traditions (or more broadly methodological traditions) which may not be at all strongly linked with the more theoretical traditions. The state, as the key institution in developing statistical information, is particularly important in shaping the types of empirical research and methodological developments which eventuate in a particular country.

Undoubtedly the most important methodological breakthrough in the social sciences was the German historians' concerns with methods for validating the reliability of documents. This led to a more widespread tide of heightened methodological standards. In addition, Levine (1995: 276) suggests that:

The empirical traditions also bore the mark of national dispositions, if not in such a pronounced form as the philosophical ones. England led the way with social surveys, systematic investigations of living and working conditions, mainly of members of the working class. France and Italy pursued the collection of national social statistics, work that enabled Durkheim to lead off so impressively with his analysis of divorce rates, educational levels, mental illness data, religious affiliation and the like in *Suicide*. Germany pioneered the experimental manipulation of subjects and also the systematic collection of ethnographic data in broadly defined culture areas. The US pioneered in producing census data and later in systematic-gathering of information through personal documents and direct observation as well as interviews.

Later in the United States, content analysis was developed, especially in the context of the Second World War and the Cold War when direct access to totalitarian countries was denied and so more indirect means of study were especially required. The methodological emphasis of US social science led to the very considerable systematization of social research methods there in the mid-nineteenth century.

Besides the state itself, social science's traditions may be shaped through interaction with a range of coalition partners, including scholarly and/or professional organizations of social scientists, the social-science based semi-professions and a wider array of social movement organizations. In many countries there has been a development of semi-professions, at least partly based on sociological knowledge (social workers, planners, nurses, librarians, psychologists, economists, educators and teachers) and their differential association with sociology has affected the development of national traditions.

A range of coalition partners, which differ in particular circumstances, may shore up the development of social science knowledge, especially where there is a cognitive and moral affinity. Such partners may include political parties, trade unions, pro-business groupings, welfare reform groups or, more generally, social movements. Often some aspects of sociology relate to these in terms of some 'discursive affinity', an overlapping of key concerns and some basic similarity in cognitive assumptions and terms. In such circumstances, the sociological work provides some of the conceptual elaboration and/or the social information required to support the programme of its ally, while the ally may assist in providing treatments of what issues are problematic, empirical material (for example, access to research sites) and assist in mobilizing resource support. Plus providing a more general legitimacy. This relationship is often strengthened when the partner obtains parliamentary power or is in government. More recently, think-tanks have been set up to mobilize social science knowledge for more specifically ideological purposes, especially in support of the doctrines of neoliberalism. Supporting social movements are often especially important in the international linking of national traditions: for example, Marx bequeathed his writings to the German socialist movement (which gained a parliamentary foothold in the 1880s and 1890s), which harboured them to display for widespread trade union and academic utilization at the turn of century.

The effects of different institutional forms and the material basis of the provision of resources has been especially important for fuelling the differential development of sociology. A range of institutional forms have been relevant in different times and places: coffee houses, salons, associations, university teaching departments and research institutes (cf. Coser, 1975). Salons and coffee houses can be significant for the flexible innovation of new ideas. Universities can be important for providing a more secure and longer-staying environment, with systematization required for [p. 85 ↓] teaching and some degree of system rationale allowed and pushed for. University settings propel specialization, and divisions of labour, especially in the form of formal development of separate disciplines. However, university teaching departments are not necessarily appropriate institutions to support larger-scale research so that the tackling of larger topics, and also policy research, often requires the development of research centres where a specialized division of labour can be built up and resources for particular products mobilized.

Different national university systems have provided different contexts for the development of sociology. The German universities were reformed from the 1820s on and launched a range of more systematically based scientific work, especially in philology and then extending especially into history, which was placed on a far more scientific footing. The French system, which was not revived until the 1870s, was (and still is) highly centralized, which can mean the rapid institutionalization of a particular area of knowledge, although the centralization can prove intellectually stultifying. As with natural science, the American university system in which presidents have strong power to develop new areas, where there can be fierce competition for prestige amongst institutions, and where (at least in larger universities) the appointment of several full professors in each department fosters a democratic climate and a diversity of lines of research, seems to have been a particularly successful environment within which social science, including sociology, has flourished.

The timing of reform to university systems seems also to have its own period-effect: witness the intellectual outpourings following eras of educational reform in Germany/ Prussia after the 1780s and France during the 1880s and after.

One particular design feature which supports innovation seems to have been the importance of role hybrids; those with one foot in practical concerns and the other in a

setting allowing for systematization of ideas are often especially innovative situations. A particular sociological example was the early development of survey research in which academic sociologists played midwives to the more sophisticated methodological development of the research technique.

The institutions within which social science development takes place may also have an effect on the dominant cognitive style through which social knowledge is produced and debated. German scholars often were ensconced in universities whereas French scholars were focused in Paris, housed in academies and grandes écoles and interacted in salons. As a result, 'Whereas the German intellectual was systematic, scholarly, even pedantic, the French intellectual tended to be orientated to science as well as to political controversy and to be brilliant and lucid as well as facile and flowery in exposition' (Collins, 1994: 14).

Cognitive properties may affect the development of national traditions, such as where there is reliance on subject matter that is strongly localized: for example the study of languages seems to have nurtured a considerable degree of longevity of localized scholarship. All cultures are permeated with a reflexive 'folk knowledge', but one of the earliest arenas for the development of social science knowledge were the many prototypical 'folk languages' in which 'native scholars' extracted some of the formal principles of their language in order usually to use these principles in instruction and structuring of the language itself by guiding its development.

Having alerted the reader to the various dimensions of the national matrices within which sociological traditions can develop, we now turn to a more concrete historical exploration of the development of the various traditions within sociology.

Pre-Disciplinary Traditions of Social Theory

Before the mid-twentieth century, classificatory schema purporting to describe types of sociology were about as confusing as the state of sociology itself. Consequently, many of the schemas advanced then have a quaint and distanced feel to them. Moreover, even their authors would abandon them. Over time, there [p. 86 ↓] has been a tendency for such schema to be more deductively based, with the different

types of sociology identified being grounded in what were theoretically postulated as extreme polarities. Once the possibilities were laid out, it was then possible to paint in various types of sociology or particular sociological writers. One major difficulty with this approach is that it requires the classifier to squeeze the complexities of a writer's sociology into a pre-existing box, and to emphasize the extreme features of an approach, rather than trying to locate where it naturally might fall.

Some broad periodizations of eras in the development of sociological traditions have been developed. Heilbron, for example, argues that understanding the prehistory of sociology is important. In contrast, most sociologists tend to see sociological traditions as only being formed in the immediate wake of the Industrial Revolution. During the Enlightenment, the first major systematic theorizing was carried out. Seidman (1983) argues that both the Anglo-American tradition and the more Continental 'science of man' were developed in this period. Some writers stress the importance of the more conservative impulse of the Counter-Enlightenment. Certainly, the more formal development of sociology was based on these precursor systems of thinking. It was the social sensitivity of much social thought in this period which generated the first concern for such lasting themes as alienation (Seidman, 1983). During this period, too, began the highly exploratory and fragile development of more systematic social research. However, it was not until the *fin-de-siècle* development of major sociological systems that somewhat more substantial links with the entirely fledgling methodological traditions were made, and these were not consolidated until the middle of the nineteenth century.

Levine (1995, 1996, 1997, 2001) argues that more light is thrown on the development of sociological thought by endeavouring to grasp the national channels in which it flowed for some centuries. Levine's schema builds on the (often binary) classifications of traditions set out by other writers, but pursues a more detailed examination. He

define[s] them primarily as national traditions, for two reasons. The originative figures of modern sociology mainly cite fellow nationals, as, for example, Halbwachs is likely to cite Rousseau; von Weise, Simmel; Park, Sumner. More important, over the generations they reproduce what are palpably national characteristics. Moreover, when they engage in dialogue with parties from other national traditions, they do so, openly or by implication, in a more contrastive mode – as

when Durkheim explicitly contrasts his French discipline with British and German traditions. (1995:99, 100)

A national tradition submerges within a more universalistic discourse once these particularities are transcended.

Each national culture tends to make similar ontological assumptions about the nature of social reality, and how it might be known (Levine, 1995). These assumptions underpin social science work in that country, and these views often have been articulated by important philosophers – who then act as something of a ‘skirmish-line’ for later sociological thought (Crothers, 1997). In particular, cultural choices tend to be made between stressing the individual level as ontologically prior (as in the UK), or the collective level (France), and between an objective approach (as in both the UK and France) compared to a more subjective approach (as in Germany). Although there is a long-term consistency in the development of these approaches, there can be considerable variation within them, and they are often formed in part through a conversation with other theoretical traditions.

Levine identifies the various national traditions in sociology as follows:

Since this long period of development, indeed throughout the nineteenth century, the national traditions have tended to become overwhelmed by more recent developments in sociology. From mid-century onwards there has been much more a development of a generic sociology. Nevertheless, distinct traces of the older national traditions can be found, and the legacies of particular sociological traditions can often be linked back to these national traditions.

Contemporary Sociological Traditions

In the mid-1930s, Talcott Parsons endeavoured to establish a more solid cognitive base on which future social theory might be built. Famously, he attempted this through consideration of a mix of theorists (each perhaps representing different traditions, although it is not a point in Parsons's argumentation) which he argued shared common features critical of utilitarian doctrines and instead positing a more sophisticated ‘theory

of action': Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim and Weber (with suppressed attention also to Simmel and to Marx). By the immediate post-Second World War period, this synthesis was broadly accepted as a foundation on which specialists in the newly emergent speciality of sociological theory could build.

There is a broadly agreed understanding, at least amongst commentators on this subject, about the range and trajectory of sociological traditions over the past 50 years. Functionalism (or structural-functionalism) is seen as the major approach which dominated sociological discourse in the 1950s and 1960s, beginning earlier than this and certainly carrying on into the 1970s. Alongside this approach was the 'loyal opposition' of symbolic interactionists mainly concerned with micro-sociological processes. Perhaps most poignantly surfacing during the campus violence of the late 1960s and certainly during the 1970s, the hegemony of structuralism was seen as being challenged from below and above. Micro-sociologies became more fashionable, with several new approaches being added to the agenda. On the other hand, macro-sociologies also became more fashionable with (Weberian) comparative/historical and more radical Marxist approaches becoming more prominent. To some extent, a milder version of this period lay in a postulated dichotomy between consensus and conflict sociologies, although it was realized after a while that these were quite complementary and not so penetrating. Also, at the cusp of the late 1960s a series of interesting books carried far-reaching resonance: Glaser and Strauss's *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) and Berger and Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality* (1967).

Although the above account is plausible and widely accepted, there are several difficulties with it. It is very widely believed, in textbook accounts and also in surveys of sociologists, that functionalism was the dominant perspective of sociology in the 1950s and 1960s. However, [p. 88 ↓] closer examination of available content analyses shows that while functionalism was strongly established in the textbook literature, it failed to penetrate far into the research front of sociology. The many meanings of functionalism confuse the picture, and in particular divert attention from the structuralism which underlay so much theoretical analysis and empirical research in this period and subsequently. My argument is that while functionalism was dominant in textbook sociological knowledge, it really had little influence on the research front of sociology, even during its period of supposed dominance. For example, Bryan Turner in his introduction to the *Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, provides a more distanced

account. 'It is often claimed that in the 1950s and 1960s functionalism was the dominant theory paradigm in North America. The dominance of functionalism was closely associated with the career of Talcott Parsons, although the exact relationship between Parsonian sociology and functionalism is open to dispute. ... It is certainly the case that the demise of the influence of Parsons parallels the decline of functionalism as a paradigm' (1996:9).

The fall of structural-functionalism has itself attracted sociological analysis. This provides a useful case study of the sociology of sociology, which might be extended to the analysis of other traditions. Norbert Wiley (1985) gives an interesting account of the fall of functionalism. He sees this as a combination of: (1) the social protest in the 1960s, (2) the rise of feminism and women's interests and (3) the decline in the capitalist world economy, including the American leadership of that economy' and intellectual attack from macro-level conflict analyses, the qualitative micro-based sociologies and from the quantified positivists, and Homans and exchange theory. To this could be added there was an interactive effect of changes in society which the functionalist approach was unable to understand. In the last quarter-century a much wider range of theoretical material has been written into' sociological theory, and the role of Continental and British theorists has become far more prominent. A useful example of the way sociological traditions are re-woven is the work of Giddens, a recent theorist rather more sensitive to the traditions of sociology than many.⁵ At the start of a 15-year theoretical odyssey, Giddens began with a series of essays taking into account each of the received traditions mentioned earlier in this section, largely criticizing their deficiencies but also winnowing out the useful residue that might be reclaimed from their work: he began reviewing the received traditions (functionalism, materialism) but then examined a wide swathe of traditions in order to recruit appropriate ideas for sociology (including ethnomethodology, hermeneutics, poststructuralism). The useful material was then incorporated in his own 'structuration theory'.

Consequently, by the 1980s a considerable agenda of approaches was on the table: one stream emphasized Marxian approaches and more generally political economy, or conflict sociology. There was a rising tide of 'subjectivism' and focus on the individual social actor. In their useful summative presentation, Giddens and Turner

suggest (problematically) that the changes were largely driven by a revised underlying philosophy of science inhaled by sociologists. Over the 1970s and 1980s

... a dramatic change has occurred. ... developments in the philosophy of natural science have inevitably influenced thinking about the social sciences, while accelerating an increasing disillusionment with the dominant theories of 'mainstream' social science. The result of such changes has been a proliferation of approaches in theoretical thinking. Traditions of thought that previously had been either little known or ignored have become much more prominent: phenomenology, particularly associated with the writings of Alfred Schutz; hermeneutics, as developed in the work of such authors as Gadamer and Ricoeur; and critical theory, as represented by the works of Habermas. Moreover, older traditions of thought, such as symbolic interactionism in the United States and structuralism or post-structuralism in Europe, have more recently developed types of thinking, including ethnomethodology, structuration theory, and the 'theory of practise' associated in particular with Bourdieu. ... There continues to be something of a 'mainstream', even if it is navigated by fewer than before. Parsonian structural-functionalism, for example, still exerts a strong appeal and, in fact, has undergone a considerable revival recently in the writings of Luhmann, Munch, Alexander, Hayes and others. (Giddens and Turner, 1987: 2–3)

[p. 89 ↓]

Just as this agenda of different traditions had become well established, especially within American sociology, a further wave of social thinkers came to the fore in European sociology. Whereas the earlier wave of groupings operated under doctrinal titles, albeit closely linked with particular key figures, the new round of thinkers were more individualistic. Some of the major figures clearly included Foucault, Derrida, Giddens and Bourdieu. While some attempts have subsequently been made to name and classify the approaches adopted by these latter-day theoretical saints, such classificatory bundlings have, however, been fiercely resisted by their protagonists. Over the past two decades two rather more broad approaches have also gained

considerable notoriety and influence, although several announcements of their demise have also been made: poststructuralism and postmodernism.

Perhaps the ultimate depiction of the current situation is that provided by the blurb of a book published in the mid-1980s:

In this latest volume ... a panoramic but acutely critical balance-sheet of the key current of social theory is drawn up, drawing on some of the most profound and trenchant criticism from writers such as Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Goran Therborn, Erik Olin Wright, Perry Anderson, Peter Gowan, Peter Des, Norman Geras, Robert Brenner, Sabrina Lovibond, Gregor McLellan, Nicos Poulantzas, Chris Wickham, Kate Soper and others. The volume assesses the historical and sociological theories of both the classical tradition and the more recent schools of thought such as critical theory, world-systems-theory, neo-Weberianism, structuration theory and postmodernism. Combining new studies with classical articles and integrating thorough analyses of individual thinkers – Ulrich Beck, Pierre Bourdieu, Jon Elster, Michel Foucault, Ernest Gellner, Anthony Giddens, Jürgen Habermas, Michael Mann, Carl Schmitt, Theda Skocpol, Richard Rorty, Roberto Unger – with syncretic considerations of themes such as essentialism, structure and agency, individualism and modernism. (Dallmyr, 1987: x, xi)

Alongside the developments of this extended period there may have been changes in the tradition-set. In the 1960s and 1970s there seemed to be a heightened level of rivalry and conflict between traditions. Functionalism as the reigning viewpoint was often attacked with considerable vehemence, and attempts were often made to force a choice between consensus and conflict models. Adherents of Durkheimian, Weberian and Marxist viewpoints would be highly jealous of attempts to confuse their doctrines, or to include them in the sin of eclecticism. Later, some of the lesser theory groupings were often assailed, in an attempt to drive them from the sociological landscape. Such a heightened conflict had an impeccable rationale: a conflict approach to theory flowed quite naturally from conflict modes of social theory. More recently, though, since the mid-1980s vituperation seems to have died down, and eclecticism accepted. This may partly be because of the wider menu of possibilities that are available so that

battles might tend to become highly confused. Again, it may also follow from some of the new viewpoints being offered which are more comforting to eclectic and multiple approaches. (It is interesting, though, that postmodernists tend to let a thousand flowers bloom as long as these do not include positivist or scientific approaches!) (The reverberations of such developments for mainstream sociology are addressed in accounts such as Cole, 2001.)

Given the complex layerings of different generations of theories, it may be useful to attend to several detailed classifications of types of tradition. Unfortunately, these are now quite old, but they are important to consider as they illustrate some of the difficulties of classification and also because they 'drive' some of the empirical investigations I report in the next section.

Wallace (1969) provides one of a number of accounts which carefully dissect some of the detailed variation within sociological knowledge. He generates a sophisticated typology of social explanations, derived from a few axioms. Amongst these is social structuralism (SS), which is a broad category within which he distinguishes functional structuralism (FS: e.g. Davis, Robert K. Merton), exchange structuralism (ES: e.g. Thibaut and Kelley, Blau) and conflict structuralism (CS: e.g. Coser, Dahrendorf.) SS endeavours 'to explain the social (defined as objective behaviour relations) mainly through reference to the socially generated, established (i.e. "structured") statuses of participants' (1969: 24).⁶

[p. 90 ↓]

Name	Exemplar	Constituent theories	Appropriate methods	Definition	% AJS 1940/41	% AJS 1965/66
Social facts	Durkheim	Structural-functional/ conflict/ systems	Questionnaire interview	Social phenomena more or less determined by social structures	36	31

				and institutions		
Social definition	Weber on social action	Action theory, symbolic interaction, phenomenology	Observation	The way in which people define social facts	33	32
Social behaviour	Skinner	Behavioural exchange theory	Experimental	Rewards/punishments shaping behaviour	31	37

Another important schema is that developed by Ritzer (1975). As well as describing each of these traditions, Ritzer adds in his views of what their constituent theories are, and what appropriate methods would be for each. Using rather doubtful criteria, he then identifies the proportion of articles taking up each of these traditions in the 1940/41 and 1965/66 issues of the *American Journal of Sociology*. He shows that sociological attention (so measured) was broadly equally divided amongst these three categories and that there was a move from an emphasis on the more macro-level entities associated with the 'social facts' paradigm, to the smaller-scale of the social behavioural paradigm.

Collins (1994, 1985) has identified three broad traditions, before later adding a fourth:

A considerable number of other broadly similar classifications could be explored. The ones I have chosen to present are those subsequently used in research to show the prevalence of different traditions over time, which will be covered in a following section. Most of such schemes are essentially deductive, arguing that different approaches are possible, and that therefore traditions inevitably come to occupy such a slot. But this labelling of 'potential traditions' is to stop once one has identified the bare bones, without exploring the flesh and blood of actual traditions.

Mullins (1973) has developed an interesting inductive classification of theory-groups in American sociology, but beginning with an intuitive leap as to which groupings are worth investigating in more detail. Having identified a grouping of scholars (and usually

their students, given that such theory-groups are often based in an institution or set of institutions), his categories include:

For each of these putative theory-groups Mullins identifies its characteristics at each stage of its growth trajectory. The various theory-groups he identifies are of quite different orders of importance, and at quite different growth stages. Standard American and symbolic interaction are both large and well established. The other four are smaller and their continuance is more problematic. Nevertheless, when Mullins returned a decade later (1983) to [p. 91 ↓] re-examine the fate of these theory-groups he found them all soldiering on, with little overall change. Mullins's approach is a useful corrective to the more deductive schema.

However, Mullins, too, may have gone too far in one direction: in his case an inductive direction, and has been criticized for turning up some occasionally utterly strange results because he has too readily tried to read off cognitive content from social maps. Clearly, a better methodology for identifying sociological traditions and following their progress is required.

Non-Theoretical Traditions

Alongside the theoretical traditions that are most prominent in discussions are arranged a variety of sociological traditions that operate at other levels, for example, substantive, methodological or ideological.

There are several quasi-theoretical traditions which are given space (from time to time) in theory texts but not usually admitted to the core set of recognized theory traditions. Alternatively, some topics are accorded a particular status of more widespread theoretical importance beyond their immediate face value, for example, topics such as power' or 'alienation'. Some particular problematics have from time to time been raised to a higher level of visibility, for example, micro-macro linkages. In Germanic fashion, certain 'theoretical struggles' between differing traditions have been sufficiently institutionalized to be named.

One way of identifying some of these ‘almost traditions’ is to see how various theory collections have included residual topics. For example, Bottomore and Nisbet (1979) include chapter treatments of positivism and of social stratification, but also of power and authority. In Giddens and Turner (1987) these ‘additions’ include world-systems theory, and class analysis, and also mathematical sociology. Ritzer (1990) includes cultural sociology and micro-macro linkage as a broad problematic issue. Turner (1996) includes systems theory and historical sociology, cultural sociology, the sociology of time/space and feminist social theory.

Besides social science-wide or discipline-wide traditions shared by sociologists, some traditions are specific to particular countries or specific specialities. For example, addressing the speciality area of the sociology of science, Zuckerman (1988: 512) comments: ‘Not unlike other specialities ... this one is marked also by ... different theoretical orientations, no one of which holds sway: constructivism, discourse analysis, relativism, structural analysis, functional analysis, and conflict theory’. She sees (p. 513) differences in views held within the speciality as flowing from national perspectives, especially between US as opposed to UK/European sociologists of science. Again, such national differences apply more broadly but with many exceptions, with the North American approach tending to be more research orientated, functionalist and ‘positivist’ whereas the European approach is characterized as more comparative/historical and ‘critical’. It might be possible to find different patterns of cleavage amongst traditions in different sociology speciality areas – and the resource material is perhaps now available for such assessments (for example, see the chapters in Quah and Sales, 2000) – but no well-established generalizations can be readily offered.

Much more has been written about regional sociologies. Several volumes have been collected which include country-by-country accounts, although not usually country-by-country comparisons. (These include several ‘World Handbooks’ with country chapters, e.g. Mohan and Wilke, 1994.) There seem to be many claims to regional or country traditions, but not too many of these seem to survive closer examination. As with the overall trajectory of sociology, many countries did include in their prehistories of sociology particular figures who loomed over later sociological developments and who by projecting their particular scholarly idiosyncrasies bequeathed a particular national flavour to the sociology of their country. Such scholars may have been jurists, literary or philosophical theorists or more generic social scientists. However, such

national traditions tended to have short lives. In the postwar period, sociology world-wide [p. 92 ↓] was invaded by American sociology with its empiricism (symbolized by survey research and a 'scientific' approach) and structural-functional theory. However, by the 1970s other traditions percolated out from the first world core of sociology to challenge the hegemony of the American approach: especially various macro-sociologies and micro-sociologies. This widening of perspectives, too, allowed room for the development of national traditions. But most national sociologies are probably best characterized as particular 'mixes' of the then-current metropolitan (and therefore world) sociological traditions. Nevertheless, since such local versions of the world tradition-set are implemented by discrete sociologists in unique institutions many will pick up a local flavour. Amongst genuine regional sociologies the outstanding example surely is the dependency school of Latin American social scientists, although that is as much claimed by economics as by sociology.

From time to time particular specialities seem of prime importance as pace-setters at the cutting edge in setting traditions. For example, in the 1960s the 'new criminology' emphasized the application of symbolic interactionist and also Marxist approaches to the sociology of deviance, and this had broader implications for sociology as a whole. Another speciality area which has been of importance is that of social stratification, which has been a particularly contested area in which competing sociological traditions have been challenged to exhibit their causal efficacy. For example, in the development period of functional analysis, one of its key contributions was in the area of stratification, with the notion that stratificational orders were of functional consequence for their societies by motivating the filling of key societal roles by people with higher skills and ambitions since incumbents of such positions were rewarded by higher social and economic rewards.

What constitutes methodological traditions, as opposed to more theoretically orientated ones? As with the scientific instrumentation which underpinned a lot of scientific advance, methodological traditions flowed out of concerns to secure social information, which in turn were often an expression of societal interests. Sometimes, too, there has been opportunity for the sociological exploitation of 'naturally occurring' data sources in particular national sites, such as the population registers developed in many continental countries, or the spread, especially in the suburbanizing and consumer-orientated United States, of market research as the press and then radio became the key link to

consumers, and in turn spun off research needs for this industry. (See above for Donald Levine's description of earlier areas of national specialization amongst methodological traditions.) In the post-war era the development of survey methodology was greatly enhanced by the work of sociologists such as Lazarsfeld and Stouffer, whose efforts were assisted by the strong interest of the media industry keen to obtain feedback on their audiences, advertisers needing to know about consumer reactions and the military concerned with questions of morale. Later in the United States, content analysis was developed, especially in the context of the Second World War and then the Cold War, when direct access to totalitarian countries was denied and so more indirect means of study through examining their media outputs were especially required. Although particular methodological traditions grew around each different method (survey, participant observation, content analysis etc.), there was a tendency over time for these separate streams of interest to merge into wider methodological frameworks as the similarities in the issues facing each particular method became more visible. Although particular methodologies tended to have symbolic links to particular disciplines (for example, the link between sociology and surveys), such links have tended to disappear over time, and for methodology to become an interdisciplinary framework shared by all social science disciplines. The broadly methodological emphasis of US social science led to the very considerable systematization of social research methods there from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (Platt, 1996).

The systematization of social research methodology very largely undertaken in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s was in itself anchored in a broader 'philosophical [p. 93 ↓] tradition' of positivism, which spanned several more specific traditions. American positivism stressed value-freedom and empiricism (cf. Bryant, 1985) and was strongly advocated in the 1930s by Lundberg and others, and then was taken up by functional theorists and more positivist social researchers.

However, there have been influences other than positivism upon thinking about research methods, especially over more recent decades. The received largely positivist approach to methodological issues has come under attack from viewpoints stemming from a wider array of philosophical and theoretical positions, including postpositivism, feminism, postmodernism, Marxism etc.

There has been relatively little recognition of these broader (philosophical) traditions of thinking which influence how sociological work is carried out. One theme has been that of positivism, which has been deployed by many more specific sociological traditions. Bryant usefully points out that positivism has cycled through several variants, including the French version of Comte and later Durkheim, and the Austrian approach, before being developed with rather different emphases in its more modern form in the United States over the last century. Another theme which has attracted much discussion is the Marxian approach, which seemed to peak in the 1970s. This approach was often quite visible and self-conscious – even sometimes setting itself outside the normal boundaries of bourgeois sociology. Several writers (e.g. Giddens) have struggled to identify a postpositivist philosophical mood that deconstructs each of the various fundamentals of positivism. In the passage I cited above, postpositivist developments in the philosophy of science are even credited with ‘driving’ other changes in sociology. However, there seems to be rather too much of a spread of thinking to readily encompass some of these themes in any single doctrine, and it is also doubtful if sociologists attend so closely to philosophical writings that these might direct their thinking (cf. Platt, 1996: [ch. 4](#)).

There has been a broad differentiation between the (more common) interest in developing sociology as a scientific programme, and those who reiterate its humanist concerns and (often then) interest in fundamental social criticism. Another broad differentiation lies between those impatient to apply their sociology to the real world, as opposed to those wishing to remain firmly ensconced in their ivory towers. On the whole, it seems that either humanistic or applied sociology are too inchoate to be termed traditions as such. Certainly, continuities can often be established, and there may be quite local traditions, but for the most part such tendencies are rather more ephemeral, maintained only through a thinly connected set of texts.

Another line of argument steps right outside the arenas of ideas. Turner and Turner (1990; see also Shils, 1970) argue that the conceptual content in the development of sociology is relatively unimportant compared to the importance of tradition-building amongst cohorts of recruits, institutionalization and generating an adequate flow of resources. (It would be stretching the term ‘tradition’ rather unduly to see resource regimes as ‘traditions’, but they are relatively similar in also being institutionalized social patterns.)

Undoubtedly there is a strong tendency amongst sociologists to emphasize social determinations of activities – even when that activity is the process of sociologizing itself. Undoubtedly, the various strands of cognitive thinking other than the formal theoretical apparatus of sociology itself may play important roles in shaping sociological developments. Many ingenious and exciting argumentations in the sociology of sociology have ensued. Nevertheless (as Seidman has alerted, 1983), we must be highly aware of conflation of multi-dimensional complexes into particular forms of single-factor determinism. Each of these various types of tradition may be important at some point, but the central importance of the substantive conceptual content of sociology should never be overlooked. Whatever the collective opportunities and constraints, sociology is constructed by individuals choosing or unconsciously orientated towards particular substantive ideas and ‘facts’.

[p. 94 ↓]

Integration of Traditions

There is a tendency, once one has decomposed any phenomenon into its parts, to have some difficulties in reassembling the components back into a working whole. The same is true of traditions. Once isolated, identified, labelled and cleanly packaged we want to see each separate, tradition (of whatever type) as unique and separate, sailing on its own unique course. However, although the linkages often are lost against the bright light of the established positions, the linkages can be discovered, and often revealed to be important.

Some connections are almost purely logical. Some traditions are essentially the flip-sides of others, and developed specifically as a head-on repeal of the other position. However, more complex linkages are more likely. In particular, traditions are often strongly linked through time, since later traditions have the opportunity to forge (or not forge) linkages with their predecessors. Although one tradition often reacts to the temporally adjacent one (as in the Mulkay point cited earlier), there are also instances of temporally non-adjacent, much earlier, traditions being invoked. One example is the postmodern predilection to return to Nietzsche.

Inter-tradition debate can be a major influence on the development of those traditions involved. Despite Levine's strongly nationalistic model of the development of sociological traditions he also stresses the importance of cross-tradition conversations. Intra-tradition conversations differ in their role from inter-tradition conversations: the former usually allow fine-tuning of differences and detailed development where the latter exhibit more the clash of counter-posed postulates. Levine places particular emphasis, for example, on the way 'the divergent postulates that underlie ... persisting differences were honed and deepened in the course of centuries of mutual confrontations between British and French social theorists' (1995: 173). He then briefly sketches interactions involving Montesquieu against Hobbes, Rousseau against Hobbes, Smith against Quesnay, Comte against Smith, Mill against Comte, Spencer against Comte, Durkheim against Mill, and Durkheim against Spencer. More generally, Levine discusses links between American and German and Marxist traditions; British and German and Marxist sociological traditions; French and German traditions; German and American traditions; Anglo-French, Italian and Marxist traditions; Italian and German traditions; and Marxian with British, French and German traditions. The structure of such inter-generation interactions is largely determined by the differential start-times of each of the national traditions which broadly has the pattern of British, French, German, Marxist, Italian and American. Some patterns of 'alliance' can be seen in which some groupings of national traditions band together against others, while sharing internal differences. In particular, Levine sees 'The formidable German defence of subject-orientated assumptions against Anglo-French support for naturalistic assumptions ... [as originating] ... one of the persistent fault lines in modern social science. Such dialogues can be effective in sharpening differences, as much as they lead to exploration of commonalities.'

In the more recent periods of the development of sociology there has been much discussion of alliances between theoretical traditions and ideologies on the one hand, and methods traditions on the other. One of the more fierce of such battles was the castigation of functional analysis as being inherently conservative, although several defences against this accusation were mounted. Other theoretical traditions seemed to more warmly welcome an ideological commitment. Thus comparative/historical sociologists often openly allied to a radical political position. Many symbolic interactionists felt that their approach fairly decisively led to a sympathy with the 'underdog'.

Links between theoretical and methodological traditions were also sometimes debated. In anthropology there clearly seemed to be a link between functionalist theory and participant observation. A similarly strong link is often postulated between symbolic interactionist and similar theoretical approaches (for example, Weberian '*verstehen* sociology') and participant [p. 95 ↓] observation. Much of the work of the founding fathers involved consideration of differences amongst societies and therefore implied a link with those methods appropriate for comparative and historical studies (for example, meta-analysis of historical work based on documents or drawing on statistics and on institutional descriptions.) On the other hand, there are major exceptions to such links. Participant observation seems dictated by the circumstances of small-scale societies as much as by theoretical viewpoint, so that ethnographers of different theoretical hues have happily used this field-work approach. There has also been a definite sub-tradition within the broad school of symbolic interactionism which has used survey data or even experimentation as its methodology. The postulated link between functional theory and survey research has been much debated. Platt argues that, surprisingly, although there is an 'ecological correlation between the two' (that is, each is often found in the other's company) there is no intrinsic link. However, that argument is debatable (Crothers, 1990). Some more systematic treatment of the theory-methods link has built up in the textbooks of each speciality: occasionally theory texts allude to the possible methodological consequences, whereas methodology texts now will much more often include advice sensitizing their readers to the theoretical implications of the methods which they might deploy.

It is not sociologically surprising that the sheer spread of sociological ideas over the last couple of decades has given rise to movements of integration. In their introduction to their 1987 collection, Giddens and (Jonathan) Turner suggest that 'the apparent explosion of competing versions of social theory conceals more consistency and integration between rival viewpoints than may appear at first sight' (p. 3). They adduce three grounds in defence of this view:

However, the story of sociology's successive tradition-sets is not entirely one of movement towards integration. Forces conspire to keep traditions separate from each other. One mechanism is sheer mutual ignorance. The classic example, undoubtedly, is of the mutual unaware-ness of Durkheim and Weber, two giants of sociology working at exactly the same period and separated by only a few hundred kilometres in physical

distance, although perhaps sheltered behind two only partly open national contexts. Another puzzle has been how long it took statistical methods appropriate to social data to emerge and then to link with social investigations and then social theory. Statistical methods were (famously) largely innovated in late Victorian England at a time when there was much social research, but measures such as the correlation coefficient were only pressed into sociological service (at Columbia University by Giddings in particular, see Camic and Xie, 1994) a bit later and on the other side of the Atlantic. In a long and almost despairing essay, Goldthorpe (2000) traces the failure of probabilistic statistical treatments of social phenomena to match with rational choice theory. In each of the main national traditions the possibilities loomed but were never consummated. He suggests that organizational reasons did limit the linkage, but what was more significant were intellectual barriers.

A slightly stronger mechanism of avoidance is merely the expanse of new work awaiting attention by sociologists who are happy enough to continue within their received traditions and [p. 96 ↓] are not too concerned to worry about compatibilities or incompatibilities. Indeed, the very notion of cumulation of sociological work, which such bridging of traditions implies, has sometimes been castigated as flowing from a (despised) positivist philosophy.

In some situations rewards flow from establishing difference rather than trying to advance sociology cumulatively by carefully building on the work of others. In Lemert's portrayal of the French intellectual scene for example, he argues that the intense competition for the spotlight encourages the celebration of difference, and underplays the constructive engagement between attentive sociological viewpoints to confront and perhaps reconcile overt differences. Indeed, Lemert argues, appropriate 'rivals' are not even explicitly named as audiences are sure to pick up subtle references.

Rivalry between traditions is often 'social': driven by interests in acquiring resources, recruiting bright students, and catching the attention of policymakers, funders or the intelligentsia more generally. For example, the 1960s rivalry between Chicago, Columbia and Harvard was not necessarily combative but nevertheless was underlined by snideness and stereotyping. (For an account from the Chicago viewpoint see Fine, 1995.)

But sometimes, too, proponents feel that the whole intellectual and even moral direction of the discipline is at stake, and that this is supremely important. So, sometimes there has been not just competition or even robust competition but outright war between traditions. The 'bad tradition' in some eyes has been Marxism (or its derivatives), which many American sociologists felt to be beyond the pale. But less extreme positions have also yielded occasional vehement fights. Even such a placatory sociologist as Lewis Coser (1975) devoted his ASA Presidential Address to castigating ethnomethodology and also extreme quantitative sociology as inimical to the optimal progress of sociology. Such conflict is of course not the slightest bit unique to sociology, with Kuhn going so far as to suggest that the pre-paradigmatic stage in any science was filled with the clamour of a 'war of the schools'. Perhaps this has lasted longer in sociology than other disciplines. Perhaps it has become institutionalized.

Empirical Studies of Traditions

Given my earlier-expressed methodological qualms about the extent to which the theoretical trends commented on actually pertain on the research front or in the textbook and other literature that consolidates research findings, it is important to reach out to empirical studies of sociological traditions, and their interrelationships. Rather than provide an exhaustive review, I will concentrate on two major ones carried out in the early 1980s and a survey conducted in the early 1990s.

In his content analysis of a moderately large sample of articles published in several leading journals over the period of the 1970s Menzies (1982) showed that 'Despite the previous dominance of functionalism, particularly in the United States, functionalist articles constitute only 3.5 per cent of the combined research and theory sample articles'. Even though the sample only covers the 1970s, this is surely a surprising finding, and invites further exploration. It may help such further investigation, though, to look quite carefully at Menzies's 'ethnography' and 'sociography' of the functionalist approach ([Table 4.2](#)).

A parallel study (but with a longer coverage) is the content analysis carried out by Wells and Picou (1981) of articles in *American Sociological Review* from its founding until 1978 (see [Table 4.3](#)). They examine some 750 articles, and operationalize both

Mullins's and Wallace's typologies of theories, as well as other dimensions (especially on type of research, data collection and data analysis designs) relevant to journal articles.⁷

Wells and Picou show that functional imperativism (FI) declined as a theoretical viewpoint over the 1936–78 period, but was not extinguished – averaging 6 per cent. On the other hand, social structuralism (SS) generically all but captured a majority of articles over the whole period, and was the majority viewpoint in the 1965–78 period. Within social [p. 97 ↓] structuralism, functional structuralism has remained by far the most dominant position, although this importance declined over the period. In terms of Mullins's categories, SAS is characterized as utterly dominant in their earlier period and still a substantial majority in the 1970s.⁸

Categories	Overall	Research	Theory
Middle range	15.3	17.7	2.7
Unclassified	10.9	10.5	12.7
Action theory	9.4	10.7	2.7
Description	7.5	8.9	0
Role	7.2	7.4	6.4
Systems theory	6.5	6.3	7.3
Symbolic interaction	6.3	4.6	15.5
Attainment	5.7	6.7	0.9
Interests	5.1	4.9	6.4
Functionalism	3.5	3.2	5.5
Marxism	3.2	2.6	6.4
Greats	2.8	1.8	8.2
Socio-economic determinism	2.5	2.8	0.9

Social issue	2.4	2.3	2.7
Ethnomethodology	1.5	1.4	1.8
Specific thinkers	1.9	0.7	8.2
Exchange	1.0	0.9	1.8
Behaviourism	0.7	0.7	0.9
Phenomenology	0.4	0.4	0.9
Mullins's categories	1938–1964	1965–1978	
Standard American sociology (SAS)	26.0	61.7	
Symbolic interaction	6.3	5.2	
Small group theory	-	1.6	
New causal theory	5.7	8.3	
Ethnomethodology	1.5	-	
Radical critical	5.1	1.6	
Description	7.5	19.1	
Others	47.8	2.6	

The cross-tabulations they publish in their book yield further clues into the cognitive character of these perspectives: see [Table 4.4](#) which summarizes several of their tables. First, SS (and also SAS) generates more empirical work than FI. Second, whereas the analysis in FI articles is mainly aimed at the group/family/community/association level – and secondarily at the societal level – SS has a substantial commitment at the individual/role level. Thirdly, whereas FI articles are more likely to involve an interpretative method (survey data is a secondary interest), SS articles are heavily involved with survey data (with a tiny commitment to experimental research) and the proportion of ‘merely’ interpretative articles declines over time. Similarly, FI articles tend to have a low level of sophistication in data analysis compared to SS. (Mind you, since FI articles tend to have been published earlier, there is a need to control for period here.)

Content analyses have some limitations since the theoretical position of the author – let alone other traditions they might adhere to – is not always specifically identified and often has to be inferred by the analyst. Besides content analyses of journals and/or texts, there have been a few (very few) surveys of sociologists' viewpoints. In the Gouldner/Sprehe (1965; Gouldner, 1970) survey of American sociologists' views, evidence for widespread support of functionalism in the mid-1960s is provided: 82.4 per cent favoured functional analysis.⁹

A quarter of a century later, many (a considerable minority) still cling to the functionalist viewpoint. Sanderson and Ellis (1992) found that some 19 per cent of American sociologists they sampled ($n = 162$) identified with functionalism as either a primary (9.9 per cent) or secondary (8.6 per cent) perspective, especially [p. 98 ↓] amongst older sociologists, for whom it is the modal category. Nevertheless more expected allegiances include conflict theory (28 per cent), symbolic interactionism (25 per cent), structuralism (17 per cent) and Marxism (12 per cent). On the other hand, they were surprised to find anyone openly identifying themselves as postmodernist.¹⁰

Empirical												
		L	L	L	L		DC	DC	DC	DA	DA	DA
Theoretical	Total no.	L1	L2	L3	L4	(%)	I	S	E	Mv	Bi	Sq
D	34	5.9	23.5	47.1	23.5	88	6.7	93.3	0	20.7	75.9	3.4
E	30	0	10	90	0	90	14.8	85.2	0	25.9	63	11.1
M	6	0	50	12.5	37.5	100	28.6	71.4	0	57.1	28.6	14.3
P	11	72.7	18.2	9.1	0	73	0	87.6	12.4	0	100	0
T	12	8.3	8.3	25.1	58.3	75	77.8	22.2	0	10	20	70
SS	209	43.3	6.2	34.1	16.4	84	27.3	69.9	2.8	23.2	58.6	18.2
SI	51	74.5	3.9	17.7	3.9	80	34.2	61	4.8	17.1	51.2	31.7
FI	25	0	12.5	50	37.5	64	75	25	0	12.5	25	62.5

SAS	51	51	3.9	19.6	25.5	73	43.2	51.4	5.4	13.6	43.2	43.2
Total	429											
Abbreviations: L, Level; DC, Data collection; DA, Data analysis; L1, Individual/ role; L2, Populations/ aggregations/ classes; L3, Group/ family/ community/ association; L4, Institutions/ societies/ confederations; N3, Percentage of articles which are empirical;												

N2, Number of articles; I, Interpretative; S, Survey; E, Experimenta; Mv, Multivariate; Bi, Distributional and bivariate; Sq, Sample quotes and typical statements. For abbreviations of theories, see p. 89 above.											
Source: Wells and Picou, 1981											

Category	%
Conflict theory	28
Eclecticism	26
Symbolic interactionism	25
Functionalism	19
Structuralism	17
Marxism	12
Other	12
Weberianism	11
Phenomenology/ethnomethodology	9
Exchange/rational choice	7
Atheoretical	5
Sociobiology	3
Evolutionism	1

Source: Sanderson and Ellis (1992)

Sanderson and Ellis's study also points to at least two further complications which empirical research opens up. Almost all respondents were able to identify two responses, and a substantial proportion reported that they were either avowedly atheoretical or eclectic. Both these points clearly indicate that the real world of sociological practice is rather more murky and complex than some schemas might suggest. On the other hand, it must be admitted, the empirical studies do suggest that the views of the textbook classifiers are not too awry. A later extension (Lord and Sanderson, 1999) surveying 375 members of the American Sociological Association's Theory section shows a similar diversification.

It seems rather strange that the very discipline whose business it is to pry into the affairs of other groups knows so little about itself, that there is only very scattered data on its membership, their interests and their theoretical and methodological positions. There

is much debate about theory and types of sociology, but little knowledge of what views are held by the vast majority of workaday sociologists who presumably comprise the audience for these debates.

Conclusions

Sociology is a far-flung science concerned with existing and emerging social phenomena in all their manifestations, at all levels of scale, historical time-period and geographical area. [p. 99 ↓] As undoubtedly the broadest of the social sciences there are few areas where sociological interest fails to penetrate, and sociology can only resist temporarily being brought into any controversies that arise in any corner of the social sciences. The heterodox effects of its massive scanning range are aggravated still further by sociology's theoretical (and more general) highly developed self-consciousness and reflexivity. As a core subject in graduate curricula and as undoubtedly the most prestigious and central speciality area, sociological theorists are under constant pressure to sift through and organize the disparate agenda of sociology.

A broad problem is that there are somewhat inadequate mechanisms for bringing traditions together. Part of this arises because of the essential empiricism of American sociology (albeit laced with middle-range theories), which is globally hegemonic, but which fails to be too concerned with theoretical synthesis. Another general barrier to more active synthesis are the conditions under which Continental social theory is produced which too often stress an emphasis on the idiosyncratic features of theories and theorists, rather than cumulation.

Since its disciplinary origins and through its predisciplinary inheritance, sociology has been host to a bewildering variety of traditions. These have emphasized certain aspects of social phenomena, different scales of analysis, a changing degree of sophistication in engaging with social reality. These traditions have developed under different conditions, exhibited different trajectories etc. Nevertheless, sociology has maintained a reasonably coherent agenda of approaches at each stage, and the individual traditions have fitted, and have been accommodated within the prevailing agenda of the overall tradition-set then pertaining. Since the struggle between traditions takes place in the heart of sociology, at its most prestigious meetings and in its most visible journals, sociologists

surely are exposed to the options that are available. Where the direct points at issue are not especially explicit, the stolid patient work of commentators and textbook writers remedies this deficiency. This reflexivity about traditions has allowed sociologists to maintain some degree of control over their own intellectual concerns. But, do traditions rule sociologists, or are they merely epiphenomena resulting from hard and clear choices that sociologists make? It is up to every reader to make up their own mind.

Notes

1 An interesting example occurred when Hanan Selvin set up an experiment with several data analysts, who were presented with the same dataset to consider, and who in fact came up after several days with similar analyses, despite voyaging on different routes to reach this: see Selvin and Hirshi, 1967.

2 The several aspects of a tradition can more formally be classified into the following:

Levels/Dimensions	Substantive	Methodological	Moral
'Ideas'	Concepts, theories, etc.	Methodology, assumptions etc.	Moral vision
'Facts'	Findings, empirical generalizations etc.	Methods	Practical recommendations.

3 Stephen Cole (1994), in particular, has drawn attention to the difference between the 'core' and the research front. He suggests that the cognitive structure of most sciences consists in a few theories and procedures over which there is complete consensus and which can be readily presented in textbooks, and a 'research front' marked by minimal consensus and much diversity of approaches, methods and models. Another conception is that there is a 'world' of textbook sociology which has a life of its own, with often a minimal connectivity to the research front. Traditions may live rather different lives in each of these two different worlds.

4 Alexander and Colomy's terminology for charting the progress of a tradition includes:

5 To say the least, since many other recent theorists seem intent on ignoring major tracts of sociological theorizing: see Mouzelis (1995) for a critique.

6 Wallace attempts to derive his set of 11 (plus one missing!) positions with a logically derived basis. This contrasts determined with socially generated causes of social phenomena (further broken down into characteristics and environments and then into people and non-people sources) and objective versus subjective definitions of social reality.

7 Unfortunately since they do not provide the details of their operationalization in their book it is not possible to check its plausibility. Moreover since (unlike Menzies) they do not provide illustrative case studies the reader cannot readily establish an intuitive feel for what is subsumed under each category.

8 Wells and Picou operationalize Mullins's central category of 'Standard American' as comprising functionalism + role theory + middle range theory (26 per cent theory + research articles). Interestingly, 'Standard American sociology' is higher (61.7 per cent) in the cognate study they carried out of articles published in *Rural Sociology*, which is not surprising given the heavily empiricist reputation of that speciality field within sociology of that era.

9 At that time, other national traditions of sociology may have somewhat similar patterns of allegiance: for example, Lipset (in Blau, 1975: 206) cites a late-1960s survey of Japanese sociologists who endorse Talcott Parsons (24 per cent) and Robert K. Merton (19 per cent) as non-Japanese sociologists worthy of considerable attention.

10 Their methodology was to offer closed-response choices. Up to two were asked for, while allowing an open-ended other category for write-in responses.

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